

Service Date: October 30, 2000

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICE REGULATION
BEFORE THE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
OF THE STATE OF MONTANA

* * * * *

IN THE MATTER OF the Application of)	UTILITY DIVISION
Healthcare Liability Management Corporation)	
and U S WEST Communications, Inc.)	DOCKET NO. D2000.5.71
Pursuant to Section 252(e) of the)	
Telecommunications Act of 1996 for)	ORDER NO. 6282
Approval of Their Negotiated Adopted Local)	
Wireline Network Interconnection and)	
Service Resale Agreement and First Amendment)	

FINAL ORDER

I. Introduction and Procedural Background

1. On February 8, 1996, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (1996 Act)¹ was signed into law, ushering in a sweeping reform of the telecommunications industry that is intended to bring competition to the local exchange markets. The 1996 Act sets forth methods by which local competition may be encouraged in historically-monopolistic local exchange markets. The 1996 Act requires companies like U S WEST Communications, Inc. to negotiate agreements with new competitive entrants in their local exchange markets. 47 U.S.C. §§ 251 and 252.

2. U S WEST Communications, Inc. (U S West) entered into an interconnection agreement with Healthcare Liability Management Corporation (HLMC) for interconnection and resale of U S West services according to the 1996 Act. U S West filed the parties' agreement, entitled "Agreement for Local Wireline Interconnection and Service Resale Between Healthcare Liability Management Corporation and U S WEST Communications, Inc." (Agreement) and Amendment No. 1 to the Agreement with the Montana Public Service Commission (Commission) on May 15, 2000. The Agreement was docketed as D2000.5.71 and it provides for interconnection and for HLMC to resell U S West's local exchange services in Montana.

¹ Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (to be codified as amended in scattered sections of 47 U.S.C.).

3. The Commission issued a Notice of Application for Approval of Interconnection Agreement and Notice of Opportunity to Intervene and Comment on May 24, 2000, giving public notice of the requirements that the Commission must approve the Agreement unless it finds the Agreement discriminates against other telecommunications carriers not parties to the agreement, or is not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity. The notice stated that no public hearing was contemplated unless requested by an interested party by June 5, 2000. The notice further stated that interested persons could submit limited comments on whether the agreements met these requirements no later than June 16, 2000. No hearing has been requested and no comments or requests for intervention were received.

4. This Agreement is an "opt-in" to the Agreement for Local Wireline Network Interconnection and Service Resale Between AT&T Communications of the Mountain States, Inc. and U S WEST Communications, Inc., which the Commission approved, with exceptions, in Order No. 5961f, Docket No. D96.11.200. As such, to the extent this Agreement conforms to the AT&T Agreement and to Commission direction in Order No. 5961f and subsequent orders in docket D96.11.200, it is approved.

II. Applicable Law and Commission Decision

5. The standards for approving an interconnection agreement differ, depending on whether the agreement has been voluntarily negotiated or has been arbitrated by a state commission. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2). The Agreement submitted for approval in this proceeding was negotiated voluntarily by the parties and thus must be reviewed according to the provisions in 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A).

6. Section 252(e)(4) of the 1996 Act provides that a negotiated agreement submitted for a state commission's approval must be approved or rejected within 90 days or it will be deemed approved. Thus, Commission approval or rejection according to the standards set forth in the 1996 Act must issue by August 13, 2000, 90 days following the submission of the HLMC Agreement for Commission approval.

7. The Commission must approve or reject the agreement, with written findings as to any deficiencies. 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(1). Section 252(e)(2)(A) prescribes the grounds for rejection of an agreement reached by voluntary negotiation:

(2) GROUND FOR REJECTION. – The State commission may only reject –

(A) an agreement (or any portion thereof) adopted by negotiation under [47 U.S.C. § 252(a)] if it finds that

(i) the agreement (or portion thereof) discriminates against a telecommunications carrier not a party to the agreement; or

(ii) the implementation of such agreement or portion is not consistent with the public interest, convenience, and necessity[.]

8. Notwithstanding the limited grounds for rejection in 47 U.S.C. § 252(e)(2)(A), the Commission's authority is preserved in § 252(e)(3) to establish or enforce other requirements of Montana law in its review of arbitrated or negotiated agreements, including requiring compliance with state telecommunications service quality standards or requirements. Such compliance is subject to § 253 of the 1996 Act which does not permit states to impose any statutes, regulations, or legal requirements that prohibit or have the effect of prohibiting market entry.

9. Unlike an agreement reached through arbitration, a voluntarily negotiated agreement need not comply with standards set forth in §§ 251(b) and (c). 47 U.S.C. §§ 251(b), 252(c) and 252(a)(1) of the Act permit parties to agree to rates, terms and conditions for interconnection that may not be deemed just, reasonable and nondiscriminatory, and which are not determined according to the pricing standards included in § 252(c) of the Act, as would be required in the case of arbitrated rates set by the Commission.

10. By approving this Agreement, the Commission does not intend to imply that it approves of all the terms and conditions included in the Agreement and makes no findings herein on the appropriateness of many of the terms and conditions. Our interpretation of the 1996 Act is that §§ 252(a) and (c) prevent the Commission from addressing such issues in this proceeding.

11. No comments have been received that indicate the Agreement does not comply with federal law as cited above or with state telecommunications requirements. The Montana Consumer Counsel, who represents the consumers of the State of Montana, has not intervened in

this approval proceeding, and has not filed comments to indicate that any portion of the Agreement is not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity. There have been no objections raised that the Agreement discriminates improperly or is not consistent with the public interest, convenience and necessity.

12. The Commission finds that the terms in the Agreement appear to conform to the standards required by the Act and should be approved. In approving this Agreement, the Commission is guided by provisions in state and federal law which have been enacted to encourage the development of competitive telecommunications markets. Section 69-3-802, MCA, for example, states that it is the policy of the State of Montana to encourage competition in the telecommunications industry and to provide for an orderly transition to a competitive market environment.

III. Conclusions of Law

1. The Commission has authority to supervise, regulate and control public utilities. Section 69-3-102, MCA. U S WEST and HLMC are public utilities offering regulated telecommunications services in the State of Montana. Section 69-3-101, MCA.

2. The Commission has authority to do all things necessary and convenient in the exercise of the powers granted to it by the Montana Legislature and to regulate the mode and manner of all investigations and hearings of public utilities and other parties before it. Section 69-3-103, MCA.

3. The United States Congress enacted the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to encourage competition in the telecommunications industry. Congress gave responsibility for much of the implementation of the 1996 Act to the states, to be handled by the state agency with regulatory control over telecommunications carriers. See generally, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (amending scattered sections of the Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. §§ 151, et seq.). The Montana Public Service Commission is the state agency charged with regulating telecommunications carriers in Montana and properly exercises jurisdiction in this Docket pursuant to Title 69, Chapter 3, MCA.

4. Adequate public notice and an opportunity to be heard has been provided to all interested parties in this Docket, as required by the Montana Administrative Procedure Act, Title 2, Chapter 4, MCA.

5. The Commission has jurisdiction to approve the Healthcare Liability Management Corporation/U S WEST interconnection agreement submitted to the Commission for approval pursuant to § 252(e)(2) of the 1996 Act. Section 69-3-103, MCA.

6. Approval of interconnection agreements by the Commission is subject to the requirements of federal law as set forth in 47 U.S.C. § 252 and to any requirements of Montana law that are not inconsistent with the 1996 Act.

IV. Order

THEREFORE, based upon the foregoing, it is ORDERED that the Interconnection Agreement, along with Amendment No. 1 to the Agreement, between U S WEST Communications, Inc. and Healthcare Liability Management Corporation, submitted to this Commission for approval pursuant to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, is APPROVED, subject to the following conditions:

1. The parties shall file all subsequent amendments to the Agreement with the Commission for approval pursuant to the 1996 Act, including any provisions that are developed pursuant to the parties' statements in this Agreement.

2. U S WEST shall concurrently notify the Commission if it notifies Northwest that it intends to terminate for nonpayment any telecommunications services that may affect end users.

DONE AND DATED this 15th of August, 2000, by a vote of 5 to 0.

BY ORDER OF THE MONTANA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

DAVE FISHER, Chairman

NANCY MCCAFFREE, Vice Chair

GARY FELAND, Commissioner

BOB ANDERSON, Commissioner

BOB ROWE, Commissioner

ATTEST:

Kathlene M. Anderson
Commission Secretary

(SEAL)

NOTE: Any interested party may request the Commission to reconsider this decision. A motion to reconsider must be filed within ten (10) days. See ARM 38.2.4806.